

Towards European-wide Quality and Benchmarking of Open Educational Resources

C.A. van Dorp and George Ubachs
European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU)
Kees-Jan.vanDorp@EADTU.nl
George.Ubachs@EADTU.nl



Abstract

Empowered by a multi-partner Consortium, MORIL will deliver high-quality Open Educational Resources (OER) with pedagogically-rich content, specifically designed and developed for distance learning. MORIL refers to “Multilingual Open Educational Resources for Independent Learning”. It constitutes a New Generation of open resources, having a strong focus on development and delivery of quality-assured materials for off-campus target groups. MORIL is value added, as face-to-face didactics are not obligatory, contrary to on-campus education. Besides open offers, formal offers are fronted as well, establishing a transparent prospective learning path into higher education for those that seek recognition and/or certification. MORIL will provide a single European access point for lifelong open and flexible learning: a referatory to participating local repository portals. For courses of interest to domestic markets, universities can utilise multilingual versioning and localisation. Blending MORIL with leading-edge quality assurance and benchmarking, truly provides the Consortium with a head start. European-wide quality and benchmarking is enabled by E-xcellence: a web-based instrument to assess the quality of e-learning in higher education. Although many instruments already exist, which cover the organisational and content-related quality assurance of higher education institutions and programmes, only few exist which have developed a focus on the parameters of quality assurance that govern e-learning and even fewer or none, have their focus on OER. E-xcellence as such being supplemented to MORIL, is to cater for open and accessible quality and benchmarking. MORIL is supported by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

Keywords: Open Educational Resources, European Quality and Benchmarking, E-learning.

Introduction

Universities in Europe are still struggling with addressing the lifelong learner. Many universities are not sufficiently open to providing courses for students in later stages of life, and tend to offer the same courses to the same age groups. They fail to open up to other types of learning and learner groups. Of course, this has potential risks, namely the possible fall of enrolment rates in view of demographic change, a possible declining average level of education, and last but not least the long-term devaluation of skilled labour force. Open and distance teaching universities can apply their strengths in this area, as they lever years of experience with non-traditional target groups. They can forward OER to these types of learning and learners and can have a strong contribution to the realisation of the lifelong learning agenda. Open and distance teaching universities have an important position in Europe. They run large scale operations in the area of independent learning, have available much content for this type of learner, have focus on research in lifelong open and flexible learning, have a critical mass and European coverage, are emerging as frontrunners in the second-generation OER (i.e., pedagogically-rich content and distance education services), and will be able to develop and establish a European brand for OER.

New Generation OER

Differentials in accessing education remain stark within developed countries such as the UK, the Netherlands and the US, and even more dramatically evident in the disparities between developed and less developed countries. OER is to provide an opportunity for accessing high-quality learning materials which would not otherwise be available and within the financial grasp of many groups within the developed and developing worlds. While the MIT OpenCourseWare initiative has been very successful in generating a great deal of interest in the area of OER, still problems remain. MIT's own evaluation suggests that most of the learners have a high educational level. This implies that consumption of OER is (unfortunately) still restricted to a privileged group. For OER to open up to a broader audience, its pedagogical features need to be addressed more explicitly.

Mind that from the start (OER commenced in 2001), all the open education materials delivered, have been derived from class-room based materials. The idea of independent study or self-study however is not yet present though should be represented more clearly for other groups in society to benefit i.e., especially those without traditional backing from HE. The time is right to break with the idea of simply "webbing" traditional face-to-face learning materials. MORIL is to offer a new generation of open and online educational resources with specific self-study characteristics. MORIL will include distinctive and leading-edge features, as compared to those OER materials presented above. MORIL will set the stage for OER with an innovative didactic model based on distance education, for content which is pedagogically-rich, for courses which are specifically designed, developed for distance learning, and for eliminating the need for obligatory face-to-face communication or guidance. Through EADTU, a new generation of OER is forwarded, primarily based on the didactical model of distance education.

MORIL Products

MORIL, empowered by a strong multi-partner consortium, will deliver courses with pedagogically-rich content, specifically designed and developed for distance learning. Face-to-face communication or guidance is not essential as compared to on-campus education. MORIL encourages all participating universities to bridge their non-matriculated and matriculated offers. Individual institutes are stimulated towards successive multilingual versioning and localisation of partners' courses. Of special interest to the MORIL project is its multilingualism. In the MORIL project each university brings its own language to contribution: The UK Open University (English), Open Universiteit Nederland (Dutch), FernUniversität in Hagen (German), Centre National d'Enseignement à Distance (French), Network per l'Università Ovunque (Italian), Universidade Aberta (Portuguese), Moscow State University of Economics, Statistics and Informatics (Russian), Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (Spanish), Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (Spanish/Catalan), and Anadolu university (Turkish). Each university brings its own language, its own (existing) course. OER stakeholders may adopt a course of interest and translate it into their own language. They may also wish to localise one or more courses if so desired. Some partners are frontrunners in this area and have vast experience. For example UniNettuno, this university (already) deals with education in at least four languages such as: Italian, French, English and Arabic. For an overview of typical MORIL product features, please refer to Table 1.

Open and Accessible Quality and Benchmarking

MORIL is supported by leading-edge (e-learning) quality and benchmarking instruments, as such developed by EADTU members themselves. E-xcellence is a web-based instrument to assess the quality of e-learning in higher education (Figure 1). Although many instruments exist that cover the organisational and content-related quality assurance of HE institutions and their programmes, only few

exist that have developed a focus on the parameters of quality assurance governing e-learning. E-xcellence has that focus in specific. E-xcellence supplements existing systems of quality assurance with e-learning issues. It offers a European-wide set of benchmarks, independent of particular institutional or national systems, and with guidance to educational improvement. The instrument consists of a *Quick Scan* and a *Full Assessment* procedure.

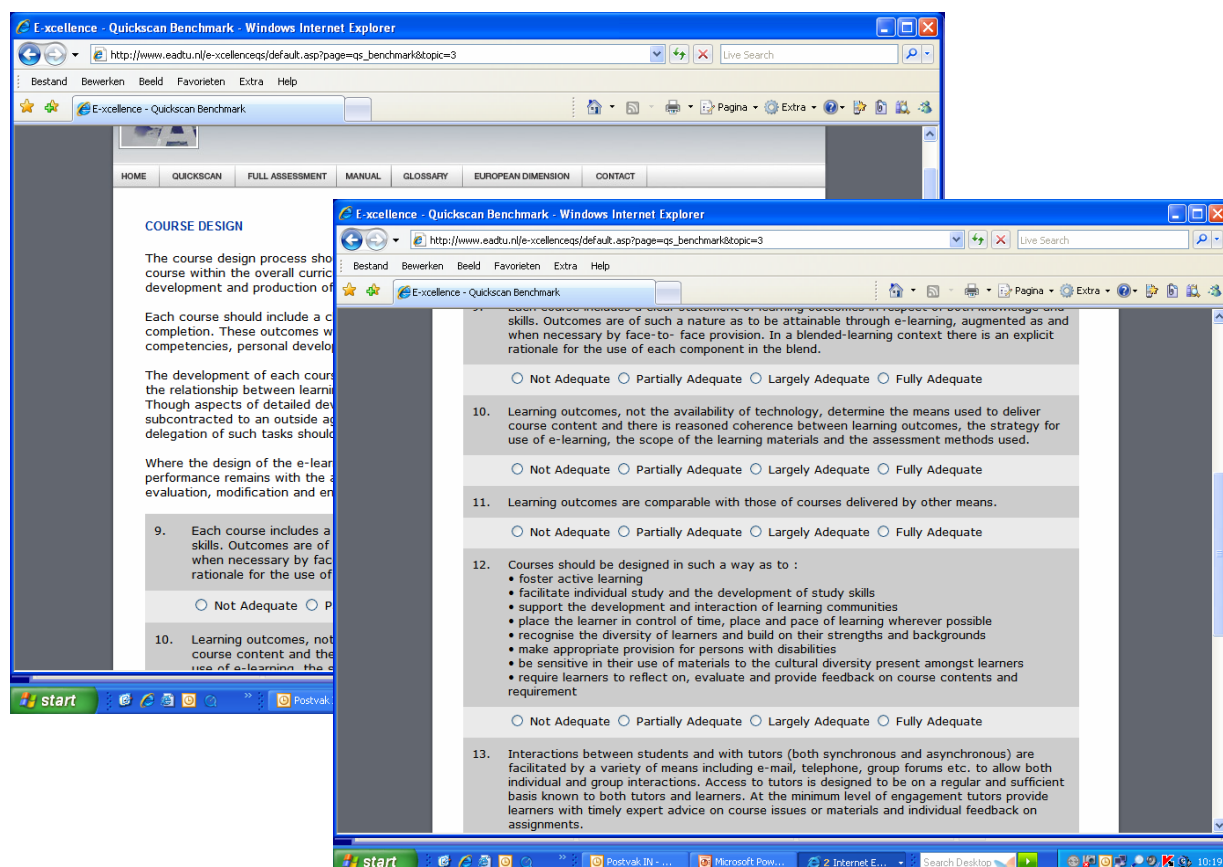


Figure 1. E-xcellence website

The E-xcellence Quick Scan provides the possibility of a quick on-line orientation on all relevant aspects of e-learning. The aspects that are assessed are specific to e-learning and are related to categories of curriculum design, course design, course delivery, services (student support; staff support) and management (institutional strategies).

The E-xcellence full assessment is a more in-depth approach on determining key aspects of improving e-learning performance. It will help to pinpoint the requirements for further enhancement and generate concrete recommendations for doing so. Important is the dialogue in this benchmark based self-assessment, supplemented with an on-site visit of an e-learning expert.

E-xcellence as such, is to be incorporated into MORIL and is to cater open and accessible quality and benchmarking.

Conclusions and Outlook

MORIL steps on new ground in a number of ways. Not only does it progress the notion of classical OER (classroom-derived) towards new generation OER (independent learners), it also implements instruments to support OER in open and accessible quality and benchmarking. MORIL stretches even further, it challenges conventional education, contemporary admission criteria, conventional didactic systems, pacing and learning schedules, constraints of time and mobility, personal motivation and behaviour, social and cultural constraints, individual choice and selection over learning content, use of multimedia approaches, as well as the application of mediating and social technologies. Although MORIL is an innovative action, it certainly leverages the experience (already) gained by some of its leading partners. As such, we mention here the British initiative “OpenLearn” and the Dutch initiative “OpenER”.

Table 1. Product features

Characteristics	Informal learning	Formal learning
ECTS Study load	No limitations	No limitations
Recognition	Potential employer recognition	Certification and labour market recognition
Level	From bachelor onwards	Certified bachelor, master (upon institute)
Quality assurance	Upon member institutions E-xcellence instrument strongly recommended	Standard academic quality assurance
Markets	Global	National, international
Target groups	National, European, lifelong learner, staff, producers e.a.	Students
Learning mode/didactics	Informal, independent, learner-centred, pedagogically-rich, interactive	Formal, learner-centred, pedagogically-rich, interactive
Delivery	Fully online	Upon university
Tutoring	All tutoring support optional	Formal tutoring and formal privileges
Assessment	Informal with exercises in course (optional)	Formal assessment and examination
Language/localisation	Multilingual course base, translation and localisation optional	Native
Communication strategy	Communication and referatory portals (central) Communication and repository portals (local)	National communication and university portal
Exploitation	Reach as many independent learners as possible	Increase student enrolment
Transfer of content	Comply with emerging OER standards	Institutional platforms
Course fee	No	Yes